

HEBREWS: A “DOXOLOGY” OF THE WORD

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ONE OF THE distinguishing marks of the epistle to the Hebrews is the large number of quotations from, and allusions to, texts and passages from the Old Testament. There are more of them in Hebrews than in any other book of the New Testament.

Because of this high number of quotations, many commentaries on the epistle contain a section on the “Use of the Old Testament in Hebrews” on their introductory pages.¹ Exegetes consider this aspect of the epistle to be important enough to warrant special attention in an introductory section. What is remarkable, however, is that these sections usually limit themselves to the *inscripturated* words of God. Yet in Hebrews the range of God’s speaking must not be limited to his words as recorded in Scripture. In fact, it may well be argued, that the author’s “theology of the Word” (“A logos-doctrine in all but name”²) is *foundational* to the whole book. The content of the whole epistle can be summarized under the heading: “In Praise of the God Who Speaks.” Or, as C. Veenhof

¹ For example, Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 469-495; Leon Morris on “Hebrews,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, ed., Frank E. Gabelein, vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 7; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, revised, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 25-29; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 37-42; David E. deSilva, *Perseverance in Gratitude: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Epistle “to the Hebrews”* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 32-35. Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament: Hebrews*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 243ff.

² Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 90, on 1:4.

characterizes this epistle, it is a “doxology of the Word.”³

I. Basic Theme of Hebrews: “God Speaks”

God’s speaking, according to Hebrews, cannot be limited to his speaking in his covenants with his people, because he speaks in all things created.

In chapter 11:3, it is stated that “by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God [ῥήματι θεοῦ], so that what is seen was made from things that are not visible” (NRSV). This verse faithfully reflects the repeated assertion of Gen. 1, “And God said” (Gen. 1: 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 29). Every time God said, “Let there be . . .,” that which he wished to be, did indeed become a reality. As Psalm 33:9 testifies, “For he spoke, and it came to be.” That the created things were God’s product the prologue of the epistle had already asserted in chapter 1:2, where the Son is identified as the one “by whom he (i.e. God) made the worlds.” And 1:3 identifies “his powerful word” as the source of God’s providential care of all that he has made as the Son “is carrying all things by the word of his power” (φέρων τε τὰ πάντα τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ). As Psalm 33:9 testifies, “For he spoke, and it came to be.” And in verse 6 of that Psalm, “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry hosts by the breath of his mouth.”⁴

³ C. Veenhof, *Het Woord Gods in den Brief aan de Hebreëen* (Terneuzen, 1946). I owe much for this essay to that booklet. This was the lecture of Prof. Veenhof when he was inaugurated as Professor of Practical Theology in Kampen, the Netherlands. On p. 43 he says, “In Hebrews we find a doxology on the Word.”

⁴ J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, being Grimm’s Wilke’s Clavis Novi Testamenti*, trans. and rev. J. H. Thayer (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), distinguishes λαλέω, to speak, as referring to the sound uttered, and the pronunciation and form of what is uttered, whereas λέγω refers to the meaning and substance of what is spoken. So the verb used here is more general in meaning, the sound uttered; and therefore, says Thayer, it can be used of animal sounds. In Hebrews 1:1, this verb is appropriate since it calls attention to God, who “does not remain at an immeasurable distance from people,” not hidden or speaking

That the author wants us to zero in on God’s speaking as the major theme of his epistle he makes immediately clear in the first two sentences of his book. He marks each of the major time-spans he wants to speak about with a form of the verb *λαλέω*, “to speak.” First, “the past”: “In the past God spoke (*λαλήσας*) to our forefathers through the prophets” (v. 1); and then the new time, called “these last days”: “but in these last days he has spoken (*ἐλάλησεν*) to us by his Son.” God, speaking throughout the major dispensations—that is the basic theme of the epistle to the Hebrews.⁵

God speaks. That theme makes us think of “words,” spoken or written words. But before we deal with that further, we must note that the epistle notes another medium through which God speaks. Greijdanus writes: “This epistle also shows that God not only gives his revelation by means of express *words*, but just as much by things, or ‘deeds.’” Greijdanus points to Hebrews 9:8, and the message that goes out from the closed curtain in the tabernacle, by which the Holy Spirit makes clear (*δηλώω*) “that the way into the holies is not yet disclosed as long as the first tent still stood.”⁶ Notice how a curtain can be a medium by means of which God speaks.⁷ God also

in mysteries, but actually speaks to his creatures; and does that not only in spoken words, but through events and actions as well. “Our God is the *speaking* God” (Veenhof, *Het Woord Gods*, 5).

⁵ In *The Structure of Hebrews: A Text-Linguistic Analysis* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), George H. Guthrie writes, “A third concept introduced in the first statement of the discourse is ‘the word of God’. Through use of the verbs *λέγω*, *εἶπον*, and *λαλέω*, as well as the terms *λόγος*, *ῥῆμα*, and *φωνή*, the hearers are continually confronted with God’s spoken word” (91).

⁶ S. Greijdanus, *Schriftbeginselen ter Schriftverklaring en historisch overzicht over theorieën en wijzen van schriftuitlegging* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1946), 96.

⁷ Graham Hughes, in *Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, states that the author is preoccupied with the question, “how we may conceive the Word of God (or to use the term he uses in his opening statement, God’s ‘Address’) as being subject to historical processes and yet remaining recognizably God’s Word” (3). Later he writes: “The disclosure of the Word of God takes its shape as history” (36); and in commenting on chapter 12:18-29, he asserts: “The Word of God in all its forms, even those which are located in history and in some sense share the forms of historical existence, is most

speaks in blessings and curses on the land (6:7-8), and through miracles and signs (2:4). Even the blood of Jesus “speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (12:24). These are just a few examples of how Hebrews hears the voice of the Lord going out in many objects and events.⁸ All created things and the entire history of redemption are revelations of God; he speaks everywhere! This broad scope of God speaking, is, as we shall see, innate to the Semitic view of God’s word.

One quick way to become convinced that the speaking of God runs as a golden thread through the whole of this book, is to present a list of words representing what God says: God “speaks” (1:1-2; 4:4; 7:8; 11:4; 12:25; 13:7); “says” (1:5a, 6a, 7a, 8a, 10a, 13a; 2:12-13; 3:7, 15; 4:3-4; 5:5-6; 6:14; 7:13; 10:5, 7, 8, 9, 15, 30; 13:5); “announces” (2:3); “testifies” (2:4-5; 3:5; 10:15); “calls” (3:1; 9:15); “promises” (6:13; 10:36; 11:9; 12:26); “preaches” (4:2); “brings a message” (4:2); “swears” (oath) (3:18; 6:13; 7:20-22, 28); “teaches” (5:12); “warns” (8:5; 11:7; 12:25); “commends” (11:4-5, 39); “commands” (8:4; 11:3, 5; 12:26); “calls” (names) (9:2-3); “declares” (7:17). Similarly, one can make a list of the nouns to correspond with those verbs, including “gospel” and “truth,” “promise,” or just “voice” (12:26).

At certain points in the discourse a particular form of God’s voice may be prominent—for example, “swear” and “oath” in 6:13-20, and again in 7:20-22, thus strongly underscoring the utter reliability of God’s words. Similarly, while the word “promise” has first been mentioned in 4:1, in chapters 6 and 7 the concept “promise” stands out in the discussion of Abraham and Melchizedek; and also when speaking of the superiority of the person, sacrifice and accomplishment of the high priest of the new covenant in chapters 8, 9 and 10:1-18, and it returns in 12:12b.

fundamentally to be regarded as an eschatological phenomenon, having its essential locus not in history but in the [βασιλείαν]” (62), a reference to Heb. 12:28.

⁸ Greijdanus, *Schriftbeginselen ter Schriftverklaring*, “This epistle shows as well that God gives his revelation not only by means of express words, but just as much by means of things or deeds, for instance, by the fact that in the tabernacle and temple curtains were hanging which prevented access, Heb. 9:8” (96).

Meanwhile also in the section on the so-called “heroes of faith” (chapter 11) the word “promise” (both noun and verb) as well as “oath” and “swear” remain woven through the chapter (vv. 5, 9, 11, 13, 17, 33, 39).⁹

God’s speaking is also still prominent in the discourse of chapter 12. All of history, the author said in 1:1-2, both before and after Christ’s first coming, comes about by God speaking. In chapter 12:15-29, the readers are once more strongly reminded of that. For here the author applies that theme to the final upheaval of this world’s history. He warns, “See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks.” This reminder comes in the context of one of the frequent comparisons in the epistle between the old covenant and the new covenant. God’s “voice” needs to be obeyed till the end of the world. In fact, not closing our ears and hearts to God speaking is even more crucial now than it was at and after Mt. Sinai. The author makes another—and final—a *fortiori* argument here. At Mt. Sinai God spoke on earth; he had “descended to the top of Mt. Sinai” (Exod. 19:20); by contrast his final “voice” will sound from heaven. And the author nails down the importance of that fact for the believers in this sharp warning: “If they did not escape [when he spoke on earth], how much less will we” when he speaks from heaven.

As we have seen before, God speaks not only in words, but events and other phenomena as well. Never will that fact be more clear than in the eschaton. At Mt. Sinai God displayed his majesty in powerful signs which frightened the people (read Exod. 19:18-19; and Moses’ account of it in Deut. 5:22ff.: cloud, smoke, fire, quaking, trumpet). The author draws all these signs of God’s mighty presence on the mountain together in the word “voice” (ἄηϛ; φωνή);

⁹ In 6:12, 15, 17; 10:36; 11:13, 33 the NIV renders the noun ἐπαγγελία as “what has been promised,” indicating the content of the promises of God. That translation obscures somewhat the meaning of “promise” as a verbal offer or assurance of a good to be received on condition of faith. Also in our parlance “receiving a promise” could be ambiguous: it could mean that we are simply the recipients to whom a promise is uttered, or it could mean that we accept that promise in our hearts and will receive the good that is promised. Yet in the epistle of the Hebrews, the “promise” is first of all something God speaks.

for they are God's Speech to them.¹⁰ Is the author right in linking the people's fear of God's many-faceted "voice" at Mt. Sinai with "refusing him who speaks"? The people had already pledged to Moses, "We will listen" to what God says through you (Exod. 20:19). The book of Exodus does not suggest there was anything directly culpable in the people's request for Moses to mediate. Yet it seems that at this point the writer of Hebrews surveys the whole covenant history of the people of Israel and not just the Mt. Sinai events. For in Hebrews 12:18-24, the author contrasts the old covenant with "Mt. Zion," clearly characterizing the whole new covenant relationship, founded on Christ's sacrifice.¹¹ Within the covenant of law, God's people gave plenty of proof, that "they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth." There still was always among them a propensity for unbelief and disobedience. The author uses words which underscore the seriousness of the warning, as is clear also in English translation: "refuse" (παραιτέομαι, which had also been used in v. 19), "warn," "escape" (ἐξεφύγω).

In Hebrews 12:28b-29, the opposite of disobedience is

¹⁰ Moses' account of what the people said at Mt. Sinai (Deut. 5:25-27) is remarkable in some ways. Moses states that by that time the people had already learned that God speaking to them did not by itself cause them to die (6:24) as they feared (Exod. 20:19). What they fear will destroy them, though, is the fire, verse 26, "This great fire will destroy us." That is given as the reason why they want Moses to listen to God and then have him tell them what God said.

¹¹ Bruce, *Hebrews*, "But whatever was the people's attitude when God spoke at Sinai, the Pentateuchal record makes it plain that time and again throughout their wilderness wanderings they failed to pay heed to the commandments of God, and suffered for their disobedience (cp. 3:7-15)" (362). W. Robertson Nicoll, *Commentary on Hebrews*, Expositors' Greek Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), "Those who at Sinai begged to be excused from hearing did so in terror of the manifestation of God's presence and aversion, and also as the first manifestation of a refusal to listen which in the history of Israel was often repeated" (373). One wonders if this means that the people at this point were not really ready to accept the real presence of their covenant God. Can we say that God was ready to reach the people directly with his words, but that the people were still afraid of such intimacy?

recommended. When they did not listen to God, they showed ingratitude for the many and powerful ways in which the LORD had constantly demonstrated his covenant faithfulness to them. So the readers are exhorted, "Let us be thankful"; for gratitude is the root which will help them to "worship God acceptably" (cf. 13:15-16 and 21). As deSilva writes, "Hebrews 12:28-29 repeats in a nutshell the pastoral technique of the author throughout the sermon: to reinforce the injunction to offer God reverent and pious service and to show God the gratitude he merits through consideration both of the magnitude of his generosity and the danger of his judgment upon the unjust."¹² To be acceptable, worship must demonstrate "reverence and awe." The last words of verse 29, "For our God is a consuming fire," are from Deuteronomy 4:24. That text shows that God's being "a consuming fire" is an expression of God's jealousy: "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God." God is jealous when his people "make an idol," and thus "forget the covenant of the LORD your God that he made with you" (Deut. 4:23). Their God brooks no competition from idol-gods. He is also jealous *for* his people, that they seek to serve him; therefore he warns them to "obey me fully and keep my covenant" (Exod. 19:5).¹³

Hebrews 13 also emphasizes the word of God; for in verse 5b the readers are reminded of what God himself said (οὐ μὴ σε ἀνω οὐδ' οὐ μὴ σε ἐγκαταλίπω), and they are exhorted to remember their leaders "who spoke the word of God to you" (v. 7a) as well as to heed the author's own "word of exhortation" (v. 22). Thus, not just the opening and closing words, but every part of Hebrews in between the prologue and the close conform that the essential message of the epistle is that *God speaks*.¹⁴

¹² David A. de Silva, *Perseverance in Gratitude*, 477.

¹³ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), "Jealousy, however, does not represent a change in God, but is, as it were, the reverse coin of love; it was the people who were prone to change and forgetfulness, and from outside the relationship of love, God was indeed awesome like a *consuming fire*" (138).

¹⁴ Here and there commentaries do give a few hints that God's speaking is an important theme in Hebrews. For example, in his discussion

II. The Word of His Power

Earlier I referred to Hebrews 1:3b, where the Son is represented as “sustaining [φέρων] all things by the word of his power.” Ellingworth says that “τῷ ῥήματι τῆς δυνάμεως αὐτοῦ is a Hebraic expression for ‘his powerful word.’”¹⁵ I prefer to retain the Hebraism, since it testifies that the divine power of the Son is inherent in his word. As Ellingworth states, “the word is that in which God’s power manifests itself.”¹⁶ The Hebraic phrase puts

of 4:11-13, H. van Oyen (*Christus de Hogepriester. De brief aan de Hebreëën*, 2nd ed. [Nijkerk: G. F. Callenbach, 1954]) quotes commentator O. Michel, “Here we find the starting-point of the theological thought of the Epistle to the Hebrews *in toto*” (65). F. W. Groscheide, *De Brief aan de Hebreëen en de Brief van Jakobus* (Amsterdam: H. A. van Bottenburg, 1927), states that it should surprise no one that 4:12 calls the word of God “living and dynamic,” “for Hebrews frequently places emphasis exactly on God’s speaking,” as we see in 1:1ff., 2:6, 3:7, 4:7, etc. (119). Albert Vanhoye (*Our Priest is Christ: the Doctrine of the Epistle to the Hebrews* [P.I.B. Roma, 1977]) discusses Hebrews 1:1-2 under the title “God Has Spoken to Us,” and writes, “This is the essential fact. God has spoken” (14). On 1:1-2, F. F. Bruce comments “*God has spoken*. This initial affirmation is basic to the whole argument, as indeed it is basic to Christian faith” (45). But a consistent development of this theme I have found only in C. Veenhof (see footnote 2). In more recent years, though, some works on the “hermeneutics” of Hebrews have come much closer to identifying this (das Reden Gottes) as a basic theme of the epistle. See Graham Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and David Wider, *Theozentrik und Bekenntnis. Untersuchungen zur Theologie des Redens Gottes im Hebräerbrief* (Berlin, New York: Walter De Gruyter, 1997).

¹⁵ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 101.

¹⁶ Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, 383; Westcott, *Hebrews*: “the word in which His power finds its manifestation” (14). Veenhof, *Het Woord Gods*: God maintains and leads all things by his Word, by speaking. “But he directs himself with his Word *also* to humans. He addresses them, seeks a hearing, renders them responsible. And that speaking of God is also *an act*. It is a divine deployment of power. For the word of God, directed to man, is clearly power and light, life or death, acquittal and judgment. It pushes people to the last and most profound crisis of life. It creates the history. And it is always, truly, the Word of GOD. It always comes out of his mouth. God always stands behind the words he spoke” (6).

into sharp focus that the power of the words of God is as immense as the personal power of the Son. And to what action does φέρω refer? Its literal meaning is “to bear or bear up.” But as Westcott states, “The word φέρειν is not to be understood simply of the passive support of a burden (yet notice c. XIII.13; XII.20), for the Son is not an Atlas sustaining the dead weight of the world.” The verb implies movement; the “carrying forward toward their end of all created things.”¹⁷ Philip Hughes suggests that the verb refers to “the carrying forward and onward of all things to the predestined consummation which is also implicit in their beginning.” That testimony in the prologue of the epistle sets the stage for the whole range of God’s words in the epistle to the Hebrews.

Some description of that power of God’s words we find in the opening words of Hebrews 4:12, “For the word of God is living and active.”¹⁸ The rest of verse 12 describes a specific application of the life and power of the words of God, viz., that his words penetrate into all the hidden recesses of man’s inner life and critically evaluates them. This then becomes part of the admonition of 3:7-4:11, to which verse 14 adds that we must “hold firmly to the faith we confess.” We are accountable before God not just for words and actions, but also for thoughts, desires, and motives. So, beware! But that opening statement, that “the word of God is living and active” is a definition of the function of God’s words. The

¹⁷ Westcott, *Hebrews*, 13-14. A number of authors indeed assign a very active sense to this word φέρειν. Westcott says, “It rather expresses that ‘bearing’ which includes movement, progress toward an end.” Philip Edgcumbe Hughes (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], 45) says the verb means “carrying something from one place to another.” “Not only support, but movement, the carrying forward and onward of all things, to the predestined consummation.” Hughes cites Erasmus, who wrote: “In my judgment φέρω here does not mean the same as ‘bearing’ (*portans*) or ‘upholding’ (*bajulans*), but rather ‘acting’ (*agens*) or ‘moving’ (*movens*) and ‘guiding’ (*moderans*), for in Greek things are described as φερόμενα which are acted upon by some impulse; and ἄγειν καὶ φέρειν is descriptive of one who governs someone under his authority” (45, n. 2; citing *Opera Omnia*, Vol. VI, *Adnotationes*, Lyon, 1705).

¹⁸ Notice that as the first word, “living” (ζῶν) dominates the whole verse, and “active” (ἐνεργής) is a subordinate specification of “living.”

word of the living God can never be cut off from the God who speaks it: it has his power in it, and his life; yes, it is “living.” In this context Deuteronomy 32:47 is very relevant; it occurs in the context of a serious warning: to “take to heart” all God’s words: for they, Moses says, “are not just idle words for you—they are your life.” If the Israelites heed his words, the LORD will fulfill his promise to them, “you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess.” Without such obedience, the warning implies, you too will die, just like your forefathers died in the desert. Our relationship to the words of God is a matter of life and death.

This idea of the word bearing and creating life is not limited to the Old Testament. In John 6:63, Jesus himself states this truth as well. “The words I have spoken to you,” Jesus says, “are spirit and they are life.” Leon Morris, in his NICNT commentary on the Gospel of John, comments, “Jesus’ words are creative utterances (cf. the words of God in Gn 1). They bring life.”¹⁹ 1 Peter 1:23 also proclaims the dynamism of the word when he writes, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God.” Imperishable, living, and enduring form the amazing qualities of all God’s words.

The author’s emphasis on the utter authority of the words of God adds extra weight to his admonitions. He himself characterizes this epistle as his “word of exhortation” (ὁ λόγος τῆς παρακλήσεως, 13:22). Hebrews 2:1-4 is a clear example. Since even discarding the message of angels was already punishable, how much more if we do not pay attention to our Savior’s message of salvation. That “the word of God is living and active” (4:12), and before whom “no creature is hidden,” again leads to the strong admonition, with the aid of Ps. 95:7, “harden not your hearts.” Other exhortations are found in 6:1-12; 10:19-36; most of chapter 12 (see especially vv. 25-29, ending with “our God is a consuming fire”); and several verses in chapter 13.

¹⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to John*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 385.

III. The דְּבַר of the LORD

The meaning of the Hebrew word דְּבַר. Beyond what has been said so far about the “living word,” the epistle to the Hebrews, in the way the word of God is presented, adheres very much to the Old Testament conception of God’s speaking. It is thoroughly Hebraic rather than Greek.²⁰ This is clear from the rich meaning of the Hebrew word דְּבַר.²¹ Consider the comments in Kittel’s *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: “Analysis of the term דְּבַר shows two main elements which are both of the highest theological significance. We must distinguish between the dianoetic and the dynamic element”: (1) the dianoetic element—a word contains a νοῦς, a thought, the meaning of a thing; and (2) a dynamic element. “Every דְּבַר is filled with power which can be manifested in the most diverse energies. This power is felt by the one who receives the word and takes it to himself. But it is present independent of this reception in the objective effects which the word has in history.”²² Further: “It has to be kept in view that in the LXX the meaning of λόγος and ῥῆμα is much influenced by the Heb. דְּבַר” in distinction from the Greek. “By nature the Gk. word [λόγος] has a mainly dianoetic value; it receives the dynamic element only from

²⁰ *Eerdmans’ Bible Dictionary*, ed. Allan C. Myers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), s.v. “Word”: “God is said to have created the world by speaking, thus demonstrating the Semitic equivalence of word/speaking and fact/matter” (1064).

²¹ F. J. Pop, *Bijbelse Woorden en Hun Gebeim*, s.v. “Woord,” p. 581, YHWH dominates history by his word. It does what pleases Him. It is a heavenly power, which works on earth” On pp. 578ff., Pop writes, “The Hebrew word is *dabar*. The *dabar* is that which proceeds from someone and by which he makes himself known. Therefore the *dabar* is frequently charged with power; sometimes its translation is not ‘word’ but ‘deed.’ A creative power is hidden in it.” Pop refers to Gen. 15:1, and 22:1, en 1 Kings 11:41, where the Hebrew has *debarim*, and says: “In these three texts the words are the same as the events that took place. *Dabar* often means more than just the spoken utterance.”

²² O. Procksch, λέγω, κ.τ.λ., in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), IV: 92.

the Heb. דָּבָר.” In the Hebrew sense “the word appears as material force which is always present and at work, which runs and has the power to make alive.”²³ The effect of the word of God is inherent in the word itself. God works his power by means of it. The word and what it effects are both included in דָּבָר.

In Hebrew thought the words of God are a dynamic force of history. In his work *Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, Graham Hughes writes, “God’s Word is seen as the central thread along which a historical developmental process takes place.”²⁴ F. J. Pop states, “By his word YHWH controls history.” Pop refers to Isaiah 55:10ff. which tells us that the word of God “is the means by which He makes history. It does what He pleases. It is a heavenly creative force, which works on earth.”²⁵ One can also refer to Deuteronomy 32:47 and Jeremiah 23:29. But by God’s gracious arrangement the dynamic, history-creating power of God’s word is displayed once-for-all in Genesis 1:3, “And God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light”; note as well the subsequent creative acts of God, introduced by “And God said” in Genesis 1. This dynamic power of God’s creative words is also expressed very succinctly in Psalm 33:6-9, with its ringing conclusion, “For he spoke and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm.” This history-creating Hebraic word-concept is basic to God’s speaking as represented in the epistle to the Hebrews.

We turn, finally, to consider that because God keeps on speaking his words have both present and a future relevance.

The continuing relevance of the words of God, no matter when

²³ Procksch, IV: 93. So also Veenhof, *Het Woord Gods*, 50-51, n. 8, with extensive quotes from Procksch, emphasizing both that God’s Words can never get isolated from the One who speaks them, and that therefore they are living and powerful.

²⁴ Hughes, *Hebrews and Hermeneutics*, 44.

²⁵ Pop, *Bijbelse Woorden*, 581. A. F. J. Klijn, *De brief aan de Hebreëën* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1975), writes: “History is determined by God’s speakings from creation to the consummation. Even now that speaking is not yet completed, because not everything has been yet subjected to Christ (2:8)” (p. 18). And Pop again: “Therefore *dabar* can not only be translated ‘word,’ but sometimes also as ‘deed.’ A creative force is hidden in it” (p. 579).

recorded as having been spoken in the past, is also typical of the epistle to the Hebrews. This pointedly serves the paraenetic purpose of his "word of exhortation" (13:22). The author clearly shapes his "method of citation" with this in mind. Leon Morris writes: "The author has an unusual method of citation; he almost always neglects the human author of his Old Testament quotations (exceptions are 4:7; 9:19, 20), though throughout the rest of the New Testament the human authors are often noted. Instead, without actually saying 'God says' he normally ascribes the passage he quotes to God, except, of course, where God is addressed, as in 2:6. Twice he attributes words of the O.T. to Christ (2:11-12; 10:5ff) and twice to the Holy Spirit (3:7; 10:15). No other New Testament writer shares this way of quoting the Old Testament."²⁶ This is an additional way for the author to intensify his basic theme: "GOD Speaks: Hear Him!"

Of course, the author needs to use aorist and perfect forms of verbs²⁷ from time to time; but his quoting of Scripture is particularly remarkable for the frequent use of the present tense of the verb λέγειν and associate words of speech,²⁸ when God or Christ or the

²⁶ Leon Morris, *Hebrews: Bible Study Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 7; Leonhard Goppelt, *Theology of the New Testament*, trans. John Alsup, vol. 2, on "Hebrews" (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), states that "even where in the Old Testament God was spoken of in the third person he [God] was regarded as the one speaking (1:6, 9; 4:4, 7; 7:21; 10:30)" (243). He refers to 2:6, where the human author is referred to "in a very vague way 'someone says somewhere' so as to minimize the importance of the human author." Goppelt refers to 2:6 as the only place where the human author is mentioned; perhaps we should add that in 4:7 David is recognized as the vehicle through whom (ἐν) God speaks Ps. 95.

²⁷ This is not the place to examine how the author uses aorist and perfect verb forms. But several commentators note that these verb forms do not contradict the notion that the voice of God still speaks to the contemporaries of the biblical author and beyond their time. For example, on the word λαλήσας in 1:1 (concerning God's speaking to the fathers) Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, writes, "The aorist suggests a completed period in the past, cf. 1:2; 5:5; 7:14; 13:7). Yet for the author, God still speaks in Scripture (ἔτι λάλει, 11:4; cf. 12:24f.), and at least some of his past words were intended to have future effect (3:5)" (92).

²⁸ To limit ourselves to the verb "to say," take note of λέγει in 1:6-7;

Holy Spirit is the speaker. Although not a direct quote ascribed to the Holy Spirit, 9:8 should be added to the two Morris refers to (see above).

Let us look at these three passages:

The first is Hebrews 3:7. Here the call of Psalm 95, “Today, if you hear his voice. . . .” is introduced as a word of the Holy Spirit; and not as an old word, but one that still goes out, also to the contemporaries of the author, addressed in this epistle, “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says [λέγει, present tense].” The Holy Spirit keeps on calling us ever anew to the hearing of God’s voice through Psalm 95.

The second passage is Hebrews 9:8. Although Morris does not mention this verse (presumably because no direct scriptural quotation is mentioned), yet it should be added. It deals with the fact of the very limited access to the “inner room” (the Holy of Holies); none of the common people, and not even the Levites and priests were allowed to enter it; the high priest was the only one allowed to enter the inner room (the Holy of Holies), and that only once a year, “and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.” There is, the author of Hebrews says, even today a clear message from the Holy Spirit in those tight restrictions: for by them the Holy Spirit is making clear (δηλοῦντος) “that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing.”²⁹ Thus he warns them not to overestimate the glory of

3:7; 5:6; 8:8; 10:5; λέγων in 2:6, 12; 4:7; 6:14; 7:21; 8:13; 9:20; 10:8; 12:26; λέγεσθαι in 3:15; 7:13. Such a list can be drawn up concerning the other verbs of speech in the epistle to the Hebrews. Unfortunately, the NIV renders many of these in a past tense, making this version less suitable for purposes of study.

²⁹ Here an example of God speaking not in a direct word, but by a “show and tell” (NRSV: “indicates”) regulation on liturgy (v. 9 calls it a παραβολή). Δηλώω takes its place alongside all the other words of speech by which God addresses his people. On δηλοῦντος, Ellingworth, *Hebrews*, remarks: “the present participle δηλοῦντος, like earlier presents in this passage, probably does not imply that the OT tabernacle is still standing, but rather that the significance of the OT passages referred to in vv. 6f. extends to the present” (437).

the old covenant worship; and to appreciate more fully the access to God's presence which only Christ provides.

The third instance we find in Hebrews 10:15. The sacrifice of Jesus Christ ("one sacrifice for sins," v. 12) "has made perfect forever those who are being made holy" (v. 14). In other words only his sacrifice could "take away sins" (v. 11b). This leads to a quote from Jeremiah 31:33, introduced in verse 15 as follows: "The Holy Spirit also testifies [μαρτυρεῖ, present tense] to us" (i.e., to all who hear his message—then and now). The author hears the Holy Spirit speak directly to the New Testament church through Jeremiah 31; the Spirit's testimony continues until the consummation, when we will have been made holy. God speaks, Christ speaks, and the Holy Spirit speaks: hear him! The nature of God's words as a live and energetic power driving "all things," and to which the believers of every epoch are called to obedience, that is at the heart of the exhortation of this epistle.

One stellar example of how the author sees words of God moving through several stages of history, until it speaks directly to the current situation of his readers and beyond, we find in 3:7-4:11. The passage shown as successively relevant is Psalm 95:7-11. This section of the book is concentrated around verses 7b-8a of the Psalm, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts," quoted three times (3:7b, 8a, 3:15, and 4:7). The author gives this the positive sense of a promise, whose fulfillment is still outstanding. A word of promise given by God cannot be repealed; it must accomplish that for which it is sent. And when Psalm 95:11 calls the rest which God offers "my rest," he invites those who hear God's voice to share in the rest which he himself had already entered on the seventh day of creation. And even if one generation did not enter it, he continues to hold out this promise to later generations as well. "The promise of entering his rest still stands" (4:1). Yesterday's today moves on to "another day" (v. 9): "God again set(s) [ἵσθι, present tense] a certain day, calling it Today" (v. 7). Thus the author argues convincingly that for the generation he is addressing "Today" and every day following they must "make every effort to enter that rest" (v. 11). God's word of promise keeps on calling every generation, "as long as it is called Today" (3:13).

Conclusion

God's speaking is a basic theme in the epistle to the Hebrews. All things are controlled by his words. That is true of creation and of providence. It is the words of God that guide the history of the world and appeal to humans to obey him, and to grasp the promise of his words in faith and hope. The words of God move along through the ages, remaining ever relevant, for they will not be fully accomplished until the Lord's return.